IN THE CLAIMS:

Claims 1-19 canceled.

20. (New) A computer readable medium containing executable program instructions for use by an intermediate network device having a plurality of ports for receiving and forwarding network messages, the executable program instructions comprising program instructions for:

configuring one or more ports as access ports;

configuring one or more access ports as rapid forwarding ports;

identifying all ports that have been configured as access ports with rapid forwarding; and

upon initialization of the device, placing each identified access port with rapid forwarding directly to a forwarding spanning tree port state, without transitioning such identified ports between any intermediary spanning tree port states, so that network messages may be received and forwarded by such identified ports immediately.

21. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 20 comprising further program instructions for:

monitoring each of the one or more access ports configured with rapid forwarding for receipt of a configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) message; and

in response to receiving a BPDU message at one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding, placing the respective access port in a blocking spanning tree port state.

22. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 21 wherein

the intermediate network device has a memory, and

the configuration of ports as access ports with rapid forwarding is stored at the

memory.

23. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 21 comprising further program instructions for placing one or more other ports in a listening spanning tree port state, upon initialization of the device.

24. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 20 wherein each access port configured with rapid forwarding is placed in the forwarding state prior to a link-up signal being received at the respective port.

25. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 20 comprising further program instructions for generating and issuing one or more configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) messages from each access port configured as rapid forwarding.

26. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 20 wherein an end station is not coupled to a selected one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding until after the respective access port is placed in the forwarding spanning tree port state.

27. (New) The computer readable medium of claim 26 comprising further program instructions for generating and issuing one or more configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) messages from each access port configured as rapid forwarding.